

Teaching German Language and Culture to Refugees and Migrants in Germany: A Report from a Corner of the Real World

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2005 marked the beginning of “Integrationskurse” or integration courses in Germany. These courses have been set up to provide German language skills as well as information and knowledge about sociopolitical and cultural life to migrants and refugees in Germany. The courses are organized by the “Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge” (BAMF) (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees) and are provided by local institutions, e.g., language schools. This paper will give information about how the integration courses are organized and carried out, which governmental and educational institutions are involved, how they cooperate, what major objectives are pursued, and what challenges are faced. After presenting background information on the integration courses in Germany, we will highlight the day-to-day experiences and reality of teaching in integration courses.

Keywords: integration course, Germany, migration, German language teaching

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1. Introduction

This paper consists of two, relatively independent but complementary parts prepared by the two co-authors. In the first part, Gürol Aktaş describes the historical, social and organizational aspects of integration courses in Germany. The second part, by Peter Hein, then provides information on opportunities, challenges, and the day-to-day experiences of teaching in integration courses.

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2. Integration courses in Germany¹

The first migrant workers to the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD) after the Second World War came during the so-called “economic miracle” (*Wirtschaftswunder*) in the 1950s. The country needed a large number of guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*) in order to rebuild the country and its industry. These workers were predominantly recruited from Turkey, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Yugoslavia. Since they were meant to stay for a limited period of time, there were no programs to integrate them into German society, hence the term *Gastarbeiter*. This was also the case in workers from Turkey in 1960’s. However, as their stay was prolonged, a great number of them decided to stay in Germany permanently. Their decision was facilitated by the German Government allowing family reunifications, which were realized in great numbers when the recruitment of foreign workers came to a stop altogether in the early 1970’s.

Realizing that immigration is a permanent fact—after decades of neglecting the situation of immigrants and albeit many politicians still claiming that Germany was not an immigration country—in 2005, the German government established integration courses in order to give migrants and refugees the opportunity to learn the local language and get to know and adapt to German culture. Language acquisition in Europe is evaluated by the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for languages) guidelines (Council of Europe 2001). The main intention of these guidelines was to make language acquisition universally comparable instead of relying on several national standards. The main goal of attending an integration course is the successful achievement of the B1 level of language proficiency.

There are specific language level requirements depending on a student’s residence status in Germany: spouses of people with a permanent resident status are required to have language proficiency at the A1 level (very basic knowledge) before coming to Germany. The successful passing of an integration course and language test, and thus the ability to speak German to B1 standards (fairly independent use of the language), is one of the main requirements for becoming a naturalized citizen in Germany. Proficiency level B2 (advanced independent use of the language) is required for certain jobs such as healthcare and nursing staff. Level C1 (proficient use of the language) is obligatory in order to study at a German university (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik and Grote 2019).

The integration courses are developed, organized, and financed by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, or BAMF—Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF 2019) and implemented by local institutions such as various language schools, the Goethe-Institut, or public adult education centers, i.e., Volkshochschule.

¹ I, Gürol Aktaş, was born in Berlin, Germany as the son of Turkish parents. I am a balanced bilingual of German and Turkish and was given a “Magister” degree in Linguistics and Turcology by Freie Universität Berlin.

There are different types of integration courses, tailored to the learners' needs, such as:

- Normal courses, consisting of 600 lessons of language class.
- Parents' courses (900 lessons of language class).
- Women's courses (900 lessons of language class).
- Courses teaching literacy skills along with the German language for people who are either complete illiterates or illiterates in the Latin alphabet (900 lessons of language class).

Usually a complete integration course consists of at least 600 lessons (45 minutes each), followed by 100 lessons of an orientation course, in which the learners are familiarized with the German legal system, rights and obligations, and general values in German society such as the freedom of worship, tolerance, and equal rights. Every 200 lessons correspond to one level of the CEFR guidelines, i.e., the first 100 lessons equal level A1.1, followed by levels A1.2, A2.1, A2.2, B1.1, and so forth; every level is subdivided into two parts. Licensed textbooks and course materials must be used in the courses.

The learners are required to pass a language test in order to successfully complete the integration course. The aim is for them to reach the B1 level of language proficiency. Any learners who do not pass the test are granted an additional 300 lessons of integration courses. This obligatory language test, called "DTZ" (Deutsch-Test für Zuwanderer—German Test for Immigrants), is the final examination taken at the end of each language course, and was developed by the Goethe-Institut and telc GmbH,² which is a state-approved company licensed to carry out these tests.

The test consists of both a written and an oral part. The written part lasts 100 minutes, 25 of which are reserved for listening, 45 for reading, and 30 for writing. The oral examination takes about 16 minutes.

Sprach- und Integrationsschule e.V., or shortly SIS, at which both of us are presently working as lecturers, is one of such schools providing integration courses. It was founded in October 2007 and first approved in September 2008 by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) as an official institution providing integration courses in Berlin-Neukölln. At the end of integration courses, participants can take the DTZ (the German Test for Immigrants) at the school, since it is an authorized examination center. As of 2019, about 400 students are attending integration courses. They are mainly from Syria and Iraq, as well as from counties in Eastern Europe.

² telc is the abbreviation for the European Language Certificates. cf. telc (2019).

3. First-hand experiences as a teacher in integration courses³

3.1. Teaching in practice

When I started teaching in integration courses in 2011 as a lecturer at SIS, I had a rather naïve start. What I had expected was a class full of students eager to learn German, who would also have the time and capability to do so. I quickly came to discover that that was clearly not the case. The students' educational backgrounds and personal situations were dramatically different from one another. Some had come to Germany for a job and did not feel that learning the official language of the country was important, while others did not have the free time to learn as they had to look after their children. There were also many who did not have the educational background that would allow them to follow the progression and pace of the course.

My clash with reality made me think about who our students were and how my expectations could have been so different from my experiences. Who were the people attending my classes? To answer this question, one has to bear in mind the German social system. In Germany, there is something called the Jobcenter. People in Germany (Germans and foreigners with a residence permit) without a job are supported by the government. In order to get that support, one has to register at the Jobcenter responsible for the region one lives in. In short, the Jobcenter will then cover the costs of rent—up to a fixed maximum amount—health insurance, and daily needs such as food, clothes, etc. In return, the Jobcenter can demand that the supported people attend certain programs such as an integration course, if their German is still not good enough to find a job. It is easy to imagine that not all people are happy to be required to attend such a course, so it would be unrealistic to expect a high level of motivation among the students.

While there are some students with good educational backgrounds in the integration courses, many students with a good educational background just skip the integration course and take the B1 examination right away, because by the time they have become obliged to attend such a course, their German is already good enough.

What happens if students do not show up for class? If students do not show up regularly for an extended period of time, the schools will not be paid for those students by the government, which means small schools are faced with a dilemma: if they are too tough in terms of attendance, students might leave for another, more lenient, school, but if they are too lenient, then sooner or later they will not receive sufficient funding. Unfortunately, there are schools that allow students to sign in for attendance, simply in order to ensure continued

³ I, Peter Hein, was born in Berlin, Germany, as the son of German parents. So I grew up with German as my mother tongue and as virtually the only language around me, because back then, in 1972, our neighborhood was still quite monolingual—as opposed to today. Later, I learned and then studied English, Turkish, and Arabic. I worked as an interpreter at the Charité hospital in Berlin as well as a translator for English and Turkish. Currently, I work as a German lecturer in so-called integration courses for foreigners in Berlin.

funding. From my experience, around 40% of all students succeed in their integration courses.

I will next discuss some specific courses. The first course I taught was an evening course from 5pm to 8:15pm. Many students were tired because they had come right from work. Some of them only attended every other day with all kinds of excuses. While it is not my right to judge anyone, it was quite stunning that doctors, government offices, or lawyers seemed to offer appointments only in the late afternoon, which sometimes made it impossible for students to attend class. Very clearly, students who really wanted to learn were at a disadvantage because of their weak attendance, and made considerably slow progress as a result. Teachers are supposed to teach by applying internal differentiation, which means that every student should be taught to their individual capabilities, while still ensuring that everyone can follow the curriculum. This can be quite a difficult task, especially when—after every module, i.e., every 5 weeks—some students leave the class and others join it.

I then taught a morning course, which had a greater number of women than in my evening course. Many of these women had kids to look after, so it was often difficult for them to study at home, as there were too many distractions and household chores to attend to.

In addition, many students did not view the integration course as “work” in exchange for the government support they received, but as something they somehow had to “get through.”

I then gave lessons in a so-called literacy course where the students learn the German alphabet from scratch. I found the skills that needed to be taught in these courses to be quite heterogeneous, as some students did not know to read or write any letters at all, while other students already had knowledge of one other alphabet. Furthermore, some students could already speak German quite well, while others did not know a single word of German. The method of internal differentiation had to be applied very adeptly.

3.2. General observations

In this section I make several general observations concerning the integration courses. First, the placement test for the courses is carried out in German. If the person signing up for a course does not speak any German or English, and does not have an interpreter, it might be very difficult to assess what course is right for them.

All levels of the integration course must be taught in German only; I personally find that this slows down the students, especially at the beginning. As mentioned above, I speak Arabic fluently. At the end of 2015, when many Syrians came to Germany, there were so-called introduction courses which did not require the teacher to teach in German only. I had the privilege to teach one of these courses. In the beginner-level classes, I used Arabic as the teaching language to ensure that every student would get a sound foundation in the German language and most importantly the grammar rules. After the students reached the

A2 level, I gradually switched to German as a teaching language. These students progressed significantly faster than the students who were taught in German as a teaching language from the very beginning.

As discussed above, the educational background of the students is of great significance. While some students are accustomed to learning, others find it rather difficult to absorb new information. Because students progress at different individual speeds, schools are required to adjust the level of each student after every module, i.e., every 100 lessons, meaning that after every module, classes are supposed to be restructured. While large schools with 20 or more concurrent courses are able to meet this requirement, small schools risk losing a lot of money, because taking students out of a class can mean having to cancel entire classes if the number of students falls below a certain threshold. Small schools simply do not have the same flexibility as large schools. As a result, these schools are less likely to reassign their students' levels after every 100 lessons.

There is only one official B1 test, which is given at the end of the complete integration course. This means that there are no official tests at regular intervals throughout the course, e.g., every 100 or 200 lessons, to find out if the students have really reached the proficiency level required to continue. This explains why many students are not fit for the final exam at the end of the course. The language schools must carry out internal tests after students complete each language level, but as mentioned before, many schools do not want to risk losing students, so these tests do not have the same consequences as official tests.

Students who do not pass the official B1 test for the first time will be granted another 300 lessons, or 3 modules. However, they must apply for these additional lessons. As it might take up the six weeks for the test results to come in and another six weeks for their application for the additional 300 lessons to be granted, many students have to take an involuntary break of three months or more before they can continue learning.

I have noticed a lot of misunderstandings and prejudice between the teachers and the students—on both sides—as well as among the students. Every lecturer should be aware of the fact that teaching in an integration course means more than teaching language.

At the end of every integration course, the students attend a so-called “orientation course” of 100 lessons. This course teaches students about German politics, laws, customs, etc. At the end of the course, there is a multiple-choice test of 33 questions chosen from a fixed set of 300 questions about Germany in general (30 questions) and a fixed set of 10 questions about the federal state the student lives in (3 questions).

It is virtually impossible for language learners to understand these questions and answers before they reach the B1 level. Nevertheless, the students are required to take the orientation course test even if they have not reached B1 level yet. Moreover, the answers to the test questions can be learned by heart, which makes the meaningfulness of such a test even

more questionable. Passing the test, the name of which is “Leben in Deutschland” (Living in Germany), is one of the requirements of applying for German citizenship.

3.3. Things to be considered

The current system exhibits room for improvement in several ways. First, insight into the students’ language helps the lecturer understand the problems that the students face. Especially in the beginning levels, if possible, teaching homogenous groups in their mother tongue should be considered.

A compulsory, official exam after every language level would allow the government to ascertain if the students are progressing properly and would prevent unnecessary costs for integration courses.

One of the current requirements is that the lecturers address the students in the polite form in German. However, the polite verb form is identical to the infinitive and therefore very easy. I would consider it more useful for students to learn the “impolite” forms from the very beginning, especially because they are used very frequently in everyday speech.

The orientation course should only be offered to students with sufficient knowledge of German, i.e., at the B1 level. Or instead, the orientation course could also be taught in the students’ languages. This suggestion might sound odd, but in Germany it is also possible to take the driver’s license test in many different languages other than German, so the same could easily be applied to the orientation course test.

Students should be coached individually on how to study effectively. (Since the middle of 2019, a new program has been introduced that addresses this issue in particular.)

There should be more funding for language exchange programs, as many of the students in integration courses find it very difficult to get to know native speakers with whom to practice German.

Germany is home to people from many different countries and from many different cultures. I am not only referring to people from different foreign cultures but also to the diverse fabric of the German society itself which is a patchwork of regional peculiarities. Being German can mean many different things, but speaking the language is definitely something most people have in common and expect from others who want to integrate. Thus, in order to integrate, learning the language well is a vital and fundamental step towards integration—more important than changing one’s hobbies or customs.

3.4. Thoughts on language learning in Japan

I have been asked to share my thoughts about Japan concerning language learning. However, we must bear in mind that the situation in Japan is completely different from that in Germany, for two main reasons: Germany has the Jobcenter, meaning that the government has to take financial responsibility for those without sufficient income. And

Germany has seen a great influx of people from neighboring countries as well as refugees. As Japan is an island and not a member of a group of states like the European Union, it is naturally more difficult to migrate to Japan than to Germany, which has nine neighboring countries.

First, the issue of refugees in Japan must be considered:

- Should refugees be obliged to learn Japanese and if yes, to what level?
- Should there be any monetary or other incentives to learn the Japanese language?
- What if the refugees do not want to learn or are not capable of learning Japanese?
- Should students be grouped according to their mother tongue?

Second, migrant workers must be brought into consideration as well. As Japan is facing a lack of workers in various fields, this is a pressing issue for the country, which raises questions such as:

- Should people from any country with the proper skills be allowed to come to Japan, or if not, then from which countries should people be allowed to come?
- What language levels (oral and written skills) are required for what jobs?
- Should Japanese be taught in Japan or should applicants only be allowed to come to Japan after passing a language test in their home country? And to prevent bribery, who should be in charge of carrying out the tests?
- Who should pay for the Japanese language courses?
- Would online courses, maybe tailored to the individual job requirements, be enough?

Furthermore, yet another issue is of great importance here. Many of the people who come to Japan to work will have children who will grow up in Japan. This raises the following questions.

- Should migrant workers come to stay for a limited period of time only, or should they be offered a chance to stay for good and even attain Japanese citizenship?
- What about the status of family members (spouses, children)?
- What happens if migrant workers lose their jobs? What happens to their children who have grown up in Japan?

4. Concluding remarks

Many migrant workers came to Germany in the last century, and even though politicians initially expected that most migrant workers would eventually go back to their home countries, many stayed and had children. Such situation, in spite of differences between

Germany and Japan, would definitely be the case in Japan, too. The issues listed above should thus be considered urgently.

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